

Impact of COVID-19 on Student's Mental Wellbeing

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 a worldwide pandemic has left no sector around the globe unaffected and its effects would be felt for years. One of the important sectors in this chain is student community as this crisis has kept student's career at stake. Consequently, it is quiet expected to develop various psychological issues like uncertainty, fear, anxiety and of course stress among students. Although significant efforts have been deployed by educational authorities to not to make students suffer and to use all the tools available to enhance digital learning among students. In spite of all the attempts there is chaos everywhere because of uncertainty and un-clarity about various aspects of education like exams, semester end, results declaration, start of new semester and various competitive exams etc. Hence it is imperative to explore how students' wellbeing is affected by this pandemic and how do they view online or digital education. The sample of the present study comprised of 550 undergraduate and postgraduate students. Data was collected through a mixed method design. Results clearly revealed that student's mental health has been significantly affected and their meaning of life has also got changed. Students have expressed concerns over efficiency and accountability of online testing and assessment. However, this study may help educational authorities and policy makers to look into this issue and help overcome mental health issues related to this pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, Pandemic, Hope, Meaning in Life, Well-being, Online Education

The novel corona virus (2019-nCoV) which instigated from a city of China, Wuhan at the end of year, 2019. Since its start it has swiftly spread all over the world. The major symptoms of Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) are related to respiratory system which in severe circumstances may even lead to death. Due to its contagious nature and deadly dilation, World Health Organization (WHO) has declared the virus outbreak a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC). After H1N1 influenza (a pandemic in 2009), it is COVID-19 which is being declared as a global pandemic by WHO in March, 2020 (Sahu, 2020). Millions of people have been affected and WHO has advised to take biomedical and psychological protective measures to deal effectively with the current pandemic (Care, 2013).

The way it has spread was quite sudden, unpredicted and people were not mentally prepared for it. Two specific features of this pandemic which make it distinct from the past pandemic are, first it is uncontrollable, beyond our capacity to control and taxing our resources to deal

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Impact of COVID-19 on Student's Mental Wellbeing

with it or cope. We can only control our behavior to ascertain our safety. Second it is Contagious and has no vaccine yet. Due to its contagious nature, the major response to this emergency situation applied by most of the countries is nationwide lockdown and social distancing hence billion of people are being confined to their homes. As we are social animal and were used to a certain life style and structure, but this deadly virus has affected this lifestyle the most. Everybody is forced to come out of their comfort zone. Nonetheless, human beings have a natural tendency to connect with others whenever undergoing stress but now we are asked not to connect with others and maintain a physical and social distance. Quarantine and social isolation is a challenging experience to mental well-being as social connection connects well with mental health. Hence it is further toll on our emotional health and our survival is at stake. Therefore, it is natural to experience immense psychosocial commotions particularly isolation, stress, anxiety, fear, and depression as past epidemic also led severe health and social crises in general population (Brooks et al. 2020).

An individual's complete health includes both physical as well as mental health. These are two important dimensions of health. Physical health refers to a body that is fit and free of bodily illness while mental health refers to not only absence of disease but an individual's ability to cope with daily life stressors, to work effectively and productively, and to contribute sensibly for the betterment of society (WHO, 2001). Thus, mental health encompasses our physical, social and psychological well-being which influences a person's thinking, feeling and behavior. According to Keyes (1998, 2002) positive mental health may fall in three categories namely flourishing mental health, moderate mental health and languishing mental health. People with flourishing mental health are those who often experience positive emotions, have a direction and purpose in life, have warm and trusting relationship, able to shape their environment, and have self determination. On the other hand people having low levels of well-beings are diagnosed with languishing mental health. People falling in languishing category of mental health are more prone to develop various psychological illnesses. They are more likely to experience psycho-social impairments, low emotional health, disruptions of activities in daily and work life. These people are not able to cope with their daily stressors, are not able to maintain their relationship as they have poor emotional control. They do not find their life joyful and would not be able to contribute to their society. Individuals who don't come under the category of flourishing or languishing are diagnosed with moderate mental health. People falling in moderate mental health are prone to develop various psychological problems.

Thus, the definition given by the WHO clearly states that the person who is mentally healthy can cope with their life stressors easily but in this pandemic period of COVID-19 when stress is everywhere it is difficult for people to maintain their emotional, social and psychological well-being.

Today, we are not only fighting with the virus but also with the stigma, anxiety and depression. So, it is really very important to talk about mental health as public response to outbreak. We knew that as a consequence of any epidemic mental health declines in the population. People become vulnerable especially those people who already had mental health problems and substance abuse.

Since its spread, this pandemic has left no sector around the globe unaffected and its effects would be felt for years. One of the important sectors in this chain is student community as this crisis has kept student's career at stake. When thing are unclear, unpredicted and uncertain, it is natural to experience fear. As COVID-19 is new virus and we are still

Impact of COVID-19 on Student's Mental Wellbeing

learning about it so it is normal to have fear. Consequently, it is quiet expected to develop various psychological issues like uncertainty, fear, anxiety and of course stress among students. So we are not only talking about the prevention of COVID-19 but also prevention of mental health problems.

COVID-19 has placed unprecedented burden on the mental health of students due to uncertainty, fear, health related fear, independent learning, reduced motivation, disruption of life and routine (Grubic et al., 2020). According to a worldwide survey, around 83% of student reported that school closures, loss of routine, and restricted social connections have negatively affected their pre-existing mental health (YoungMinds, 2020).

Mental health was already a concern among adolescents in India. According to World Health Organization around 57 million people are affected by depression. There is a sharp increase in various psychological disorders like stress, anxiety, substance abuse, depression among youth. As youth are not well equipped to handle these problems effectively they need constant social support to face these daily life challenges (Nalgundwar, 2019).

To break the chain of infection almost all educational institutes are closed for an uncertain period of time. On one end it has disrupted the daily normal routine of student community on another end this closure is affecting their overall well-being. Closure of colleges and universities may have long term negative psychological impact on students. Educational institutes are not only the place of learning for students but they used to serve a social and cultural hub too that satisfy student's various psychological and emotional needs. For some students college campus is like their home, they used to spend long hours there with their friends. They used to enjoy their college life. However as colleges and universities are closed for an uncertain period of time, these students are more likely to experience frustration, anxiety, loneliness, isolation because of connection break from their friends. Since social connection is therapeutic during uncertain and scary times like COVID-19 and may prove the first step to face it with solidarity. But the prevalent lockdown, closure of colleges, social distancing has made it difficult to connect.

Moreover students who were undergoing any psychological or counseling service at campus would not be able to access these services which may further aggravate their symptoms and challenges (Agnew et al., 2019). Since, this outbreak resulted in immense anxiety and distress hence there is the need for adequate training and technological advancement of healthcare professionals, system, and services.

Although significant efforts have been deployed by educational authorities to not to make students suffer and to use all the tools available to enhance digital learning among students. All the academic activities are either postponed or channelized through digital medium. Even though technology has proven a silver line in this crisis period but it has its own challenges and repercussions especially in Indian realm where majority people are not technology savvy and lack digital infrastructure and equipments. In spite of all the attempts there is chaos everywhere because of uncertainty and un-clarity about various aspects of education like exams, semester end, results declaration, start of new semester and various competitive exams etc. the current educational transformation has raised various questions like: What about those students who do not have smart phones, computers, laptops and internet at home? How to teach practical courses online? What about those students whose courses can not be handled virtually? What about those students who are living in remote areas and do not have access to internet? Thus, all these are big concerns and proving to be a

challenging task for students. Keeping all this in mind it is crucial to explore how students' wellbeing is affected by this pandemic and how do they view online or digital education.

METHOD

Research Design

Both quantitative and qualitative designs have some loopholes. Using a single design does not capture the full picture of the phenomenon under study. By using mixed method design, what is left can be studied. To capture a richer and broader understanding of mental health of students' present study was conducted in two phases and an exploratory mixed method design was used. First a qualitative study was conducted followed by a quantitative survey.

Study 1: Qualitative study

Sample

The study was conducted during the month of May and June 2020. For qualitative study 55 undergraduate and postgraduate students undertaking online classes were approached. An online open-ended questionnaire was created and distributed among students through different online platforms. After taking their consent they were asked following open-ended questions:

- Some people are able to enjoy life irrespective of any crises in the society. To what extent does this characterization describe you?
- How hopeful are you about your Future?
- Did this pandemic bring any change in your purpose of life?
- How do you find online education?
- A total of 47 students responded out of which 29 were males and 18 were females. Their age ranges between 19 to 26 years.

Data Analysis

After the transcription, all the data was organized. Each response was read carefully and was coded with a descriptive label. After carefully coding the whole data, frequency of response and broader themes has been counted which is presented in the result section.

Results

Participants were asked question related to their present mental state like if they are able to stay happy, their hope, meaning in life and their perspective towards virtual pedagogy. Their responses have been carefully content analyzed. Following themes have been emerged from their responses:

Happiness: Results clearly reveal that this pandemic is affecting students well-being. Some students are trying to be positive and being happy but around 80% of the participants said that it is very difficult for them to be happy. For instance, one participant said:

'Circumstances around me affects me a lot I just can't ignore the situation around me as we are aware of prevailing situation, it's very difficult for me to be patient as I am losing my patience day by day and it's leading me towards anxiety and depression'

Participants reported that they try to apply various coping strategies to face this crisis but they often got disturb by seeing the chaos escalating on a rapid pace. Another participant expressed:

'Things getting worst day by day. So, I don't find any reason to be happy or feel happiness.'
'I am not able to feel happy....Not at all... even a small thing affects me a lot..'

Impact of COVID-19 on Student's Mental Wellbeing

'Because of the social pathetic situation, it makes more worry about the surrounding .and it effects me. I am very anxious about what is happening around me. most of the times it makes me unhappy'

Hope: Participant's responses related to their hope about their future and how much hopeful they are in the present threatening situation revealed that majority of students are pretty hopeful. They said.

'Everything will become normal in future.'
'There is still hope. One thing I have learnt despite failing is surviving and trying everyday'
'I am pretty much hopeful. Delays are minor setbacks or at times, blessings in disguise.'
'The world is going with an uncertainty. that make little hopelessness about the future. that everything going without the planning that we already have now I am in a condition like just live and wish to everyone should survive'

Thus, despite the uncertainty everywhere they are hopeful about their future that things become better.

Meaning in Life: One of the significant findings of the present study is that majority of participants have found a new way of life and a new meaning in their life. For instance, we can sense in their verbatim....

'Yes because during pandemic I am mostly spend my time with my family so our understandings going better everyday. Therefore, I care of my family in future also and understand very well.'

Other participants

'Yes, before pandemic when I have depended on other people but now no one is there so in this situation let think about of me then I found it what I love to do. Then I started soon.'
'Yes, earlier I was a materialistic person but when it's all started, I get detached from all these things and more attached to Allah day by day'
'Yes, I think I became more serious towards life'
'Yes, a lot. It has made me realise that the world is a temporary place. We must focus our attention to the important things of life, instead of running after material world.'
'That make an uncertainty in my life and make change in my approach to life also in my future goals, wishes, desires everything'

Thus, from the above examples it can be inferred that COVID-19 brought a change in the perspective of life.

Virtual Pedagogy: As we know that students are facing lots of challenges due to the transformation of mode of teaching and learning. Hence it is imperative to consider their opinion towards this online education. To the question about the effectiveness of online education we got mixed opinion as can be seen in the verbatim of the participants.

'It's really helpful and can be accessed at ease.
However it might be a problem for some people but it makes the classes friendly'
'I don't find it fruitful because for me, physical presence of teacher is really important for concentration which is not possible in this online classes.'

Impact of COVID-19 on Student's Mental Wellbeing

*Online education is ok with higher lever students like PG. it is not too much effective when compared to normal education that we already followed. but when it will used that make a whole change in education system'
'Helpful but less interactive.'*

Overall Findings of Qualitative Study

Results of the qualitative study revealed that students are undergoing multiple stressors. Though this pandemic has resulted in decrease in happiness level but the other side of the coin reveals that students are hopeful and have found a new meaning in their life. Further content analysis revealed that apart from the fear and health anxiety, online education has further become a hassle. It was found out that most of the students are not finding online education as an effective means of learning. They are of the view that physical presence of the teacher is more effective to create a learning environment. Such hassles are directly affecting the well beings of students. Therefore, the concern authorities should take necessary steps to protect the mental well-being of their students.

Study 2: A Quantitative Study

Findings from qualitative exploration suggested that this pandemic has affected the mental health and well-being of students. Therefore, researchers became interested to expand the research and go for a quantitative study to elaborate qualitative findings.

METHOD

Sample

The sample comprises a total of 485 Indian students enrolled in different under graduate and post graduate courses (out of which 268 are males and 217 are females). The age ranges between 16 to 24 years. The mean age of the sample was 23.79 (SD=2.53).

Tool

Mental Health Continuum-Short Form (MHC-SF)

Mental Health Continuum- short form (MHC-SF, Keyes, 2005) was developed by Keyes. It consists of three dimensions of wellbeing i.e., emotional, social and psychological. It is a 14 item scale out of which emotional well-being has three items measuring positive affect and satisfaction with life. Five items are measuring social well-being, each focusing on separate aspect of social well-being i.e. social contribution, social integration, social acceptance and social coherence (Keyes, 1998). Finally, six items represent different dimensions of psychological well-being of Ryff's model (Ryff 1989) namely self- acceptance, environmental mastery, positive relation with others, Personal growth, autonomy and purpose in life. The overall scale has 0.88 internal consistency in the present study. Cronbach's alpha for emotional, social, and psychological subscales were 0.78, 0.75 and 0.85, respectively.

Procedure

The study was conducted from May 2020 to 6th June 2020. An online questionnaire was created and distributed among students through different online platforms. After taking their consent they were asked to fill the questionnaire. They were briefed about the purpose of study and assured of confidentiality. The data was analysed with the help of SPSS version 25.

RESULTS*Table 1: Showing Mean Difference between Male and Female Students on Different Dimensions of Mental Health*

Mental Well being	Gender		t	P
	Female	Male		
EWB	9.75 (3.62)	9.63 (3.69)	.354	.724
SWB	12.58 (5.68)	13.66 (5.46)	2.04	.039*
PWB	19.55 (6.55)	20.49 (6.07)	1.58	.114

Table 1 shows differences in different dimensions of mental well-being among male and female students during the lockdown. Results show that on emotional well-being male and female students are not differing significantly but on social wellbeing a significant mean difference has been found out among them ($t=2.04$, $p=.039$). However, on psychological well-being difference is not significant but it can be inferred from the mean values that male students are high on psychological well-being than their female counterparts.

To be diagnosed with *complete* mental health, individuals must experience 'every day' or 'almost every day' at least one of the three symptoms of emotional well-being and at least six of the eleven symptoms of positive functioning during the last month. Individuals who showed low levels (i.e., 'never' or 'once or twice' during the past month) on at least one measure of emotional well-being and low levels on at least six measures of positive functioning are diagnosed with *poor* mental health. Individuals who are not falling in these categories would be diagnosed having *moderate* mental health. Moreover, on the basis of scoring range of MHC-SF, it is found that majority of the sample in the current study is falling in Moderate mental wellbeing category.

Overall Findings of Quantitative Study

Results of quantitative study reported that majority of student's mental health is falling in moderate level which means they are experiencing limitations in their activity of daily living, missed work, and prone to use acute health services. Moreover, a gender difference was also highlighted exhibiting males having better mental health compared to their female counterparts.

DISCUSSION

COVID-19 is not only a health crisis but it has shown its potential to bring social, psychological, and economic crises that will leave deep marks for years. One of the most vulnerable groups is student's community. Therefore, the present study aimed to explore the impact of COVID-19 on mental well-being of students. Data were collected from students enrolled in different undergraduate and post graduate courses. A mixed method design was used.

Since a mixed method design was used to study the objective of the research and it was found that results of both the studies complemented each other. The Results clearly revealed that student's mental health has been significantly affected during this pandemic. Their perspective towards life has been changed and they are trying to find a new meaning of life. As we know that before this pandemic everybody was busy in his/her life and rarely they could spend quality time with their family and loved ones. Nonetheless, this pandemic and consequent nationwide lockdown and social distancing made people confined to their homes. This further proved to be an opportunity for people to self-introspects.

Impact of COVID-19 on Student's Mental Wellbeing

Moreover, as most significant determinant of students well-being is educational life which is disrupted a lot due to the closures of schools and colleges after COVID-19 outbreak. Although pedagogy has been shifted towards virtual classes but as being reported by students that it can not replace physical classes and there are lots of challenges for its successful implementation. Around 50% of participants are finding it helpful but not as a replacement of physical education. They are finding it helpful because this is the only silver line amid this crisis and can save their careers. As COVID-19 outbreak transformed teaching mode face to face real life lectures to online meetings to as certain social distancing (Gewin, 2020., The, 2020). Most students have returned to their homes and prohibited to perform various student activities like sports, cultural, job and other social activities. Their routine has been disturbed. Students are going through immense uncertainties as still there is no clear-cut guidelines pertaining to conduction of exams and starting of new semester. However, students have also expressed concerns over efficiency and accountability of online evaluation and assessment. Thus, this study may help educational authorities and policy makers to look into this issue and help overcome mental health issues related to this pandemic.

Individuals who have high or low mental well-being must exhibited low or high levels on at least 7 or more of 14 items scale. Results of the present study clearly revealed that majority of students' score are falling in moderate mental health category. Therefore, it can be inferred from the results that students are lacking experience of positive affect and satisfaction. This finding further correlates with the findings of qualitative research where students reported that they are not able to experience happiness most of the time during this stressful period.

As far as the gender difference is concerned present research explored that male students have better social and psychological wellbeing then their female student counterpart. In the present study it was observed that male students have better sense of social contribution, social integration, social acceptance and social coherence. They are more likely have to self-acceptance, environmental mastery, positive relation with others, personal growth, autonomy and purpose in life. Gender significantly determines mental health and well-being (WHO, 2000). Because of different social and cultural factors, female's responsibilities as a caregiver have been increased during this lockdown period. According to KFF Coronavirus poll (March, 2020) male and female are responding differently to this pandemic as females are more burdened over the health and economic challenges of their family (Hamel & Salganicoff, 2020). The Inter Agency Standing Committee has also advised gender sensitive implementation of mental health services (Golden, 2020).

Thus, COVID-19 has brought immense distress among the student fraternity which might lead unfavorable consequences for them impacting their learning and psychological health (Sahu, 2020).

CONCLUSION

Thus, it can be concluded that students' wellbeing is critically affected by COVID-19. It is hard to determine when the things will return back to normal. Due to widespread uncertainty the pandemic may severely impact the careers of students specially the final year students. They are experiencing major disruptions in teaching and assessment, postponement of examination and entrances etc. in the final part of their studies. It is high time that educational institutes should take protective and preventive measures to support their staff and students. They should implement virtual counseling services, better technological

Impact of COVID-19 on Student's Mental Wellbeing

infrastructure to enhance the mental health and well-being of students and staff and especially for students living in remote areas. In the present scenario it is also important to take student's perspective into consideration to make learning more effective and fruitful.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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